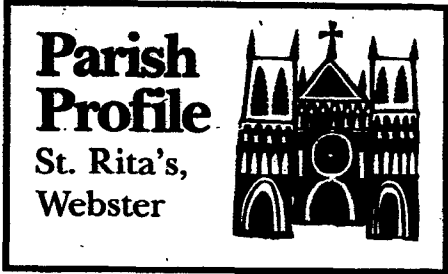


PARISH PROFILE

Thriving Webster parish adds new building



By Mike Latona
Staff writer

WEBSTER — "Do you approve?" inquired Sister Katherine Ann Rappi, SSJ, as she flashed the thumbs-up sign.

"Oh, I do!" exclaimed Felicia Armignacco, a St. Rita's Church parishioner.

Enthusiasm was the prevailing sentiment the weekend of March 16-17, as members of the St. Rita's community experienced their first walk-through in the new parish center.

Sister Rappi, principal of St. Rita's School, and Armignacco, a parish Synod coordinator, weren't the only ones bubbling over the parish center. As admirers filed into a sparkling new gymnasium, a variety of superlatives poured out: "Cool." ... "Very nice." ... "It's beautiful." ... "Oh, my gosh." ... "Wow!" ... "Holy mackerel." ... "Really, really, nice."

In addition to the gym, several meeting rooms and a library are included in the parish center. Its southern end connects with St. Rita's School, and the northern end leads into the church.

"In the beginning there were a group of people who wanted the parish center at the back of the school, and a group who wanted it at the back of the church. It just evolved (into both)," remarked Sister Rappi, the 13th-year school principal.

Festivities for the parish center will resume Tuesday evening, May 14, when Bishop Matthew H. Clark is scheduled to preside over a dedication ceremony for the 13,000-square foot building.

"As the building has been rising from the ground, the excitement from parishioners has been rising with it. This is truly an historic event for the parish," said parishioner Steve Cataldi, who served as the parish center's project manager.

Cataldi acknowledged that the parish center was made possible through parishioners' strong financial commitment — a commitment that has been evident at other times in the parish's 46-year history. He pointed out that after a new church building opened in 1984, its 25-year mortgage was paid off in only nine years. With this huge debt erased so soon, St. Rita's was able to move ahead quickly on the \$1.2 million parish center.

Parishioners' support is evident in many other ways, noted Sister Judy Whalen, SSJ. She estimates that nearly 100 ministries are housed at St. Rita's.

"This is a very compassionate parish with a variety of committees that reach out," said Sister Whalen, the parish minister. "We'll be using those meeting rooms (in the parish center) as a network to reach out to the poor and needy."

St. Rita's was founded in 1950 with comparatively humble beginnings. The original church building was the former St. Margaret Mary Church in Irondequoit, which was transported to Webster and reassembled. Five years after the



Father John Reif, pastor of St. Rita's Church in Webster, and project manager Steve Cataldi cut the ribbon for the new parish center March 16.

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

SNAPSHOT

St. Rita's Church
1008 Maple Drive, Webster
716/671-1100

Established: 1950

Registered families: 1,800

Ministerial staff:

Pastor: Father John T. Reif

Parochial vicar:

Father Donald E. McCarthy,
CSB

Parish deacons: Richard Mahany,

Stanley Douglas

Parish minister:

Sister Judy Whalen, SSJ

Parish visitor:

Sister Maura Wilson, SSJ

Music director: Betty Folger

Parish council president:

Paul Morehouse

Parish secretary: Carol Wynne

Parish bookkeeper:

Sharon Pucher

Religious education administrator:

Phyllis Benitez

Associate director of religious

education: Coleen De King

Youth minister: Melissa Vullo

St. Rita's School principal:

Sister Katherine Ann
Rappi, RSM



Melanie Heberle points out her name on the benefactors list to Linda Croyle during a tour of the parish center March 16.

the 23-acre St. Rita's campus. Nearly a half-century after acquiring this property to found the parish, St. Rita's still uses the barn for some parish events.

The barn serves as a good symbol of this western edge of Webster, which has remained a calm and peaceful area in an otherwise rapidly expanding town.

"It's very sequestered here, even though it's only a minute or two from the expressway," noted Father John T. Reif, the parish pastor.

St. Rita's historical list of pastors is remarkably short. The late Father Francis Kleehammer guided St. Rita's from its inception until his retirement in 1978, at which point Father Reif and Father James C. Burke were appointed co-pastors.

Father Burke — currently the pastor at St. Agnes Church in Avon — left the parish in 1981, and Father Reif has been the sole pastor since that time. In his 18 years at St. Rita's, Father Reif has

watched a parish blossom from 1,200 to 1,800 families.

Judging from the vitality of St. Rita's youth programs, the parish boasts strong involvement from people of all ages. Sister Rappi noted that St. Rita's School enrollment is 300 students in grades pre-kindergarten through six, and an additional 600 youths are involved in the parish religious-education program.

And, according to youth minister Melissa Vullo, youth-group participation often includes 30 or more teenagers — including 70 St. Rita's teens for a recent "Movie Madness" lock-in with other youth groups from Monroe County.

Along with the growth of his parish, Father Reif added that he's derived great satisfaction from serving in a community with ancestral roots: His grandmother was baptized at nearby Holy Trinity Church.

"It's been extremely fulfilling to be connected with the growth of God's people in these last years of the 20th century in this particular, homelike atmosphere," Father Reif commented.

...
EDITORS' NOTE: St. Rita's School will hold a 40th-anniversary reunion celebration Saturday, May 25. All St. Rita's alumni are invited to attend. Call 716/671-1100 for details.

"Congratulations"



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